

By Regina Chanel Rodriguez

Building Writer Confidence Through Music: A Journey Through the Words & Music Program



The Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum celebrates its 36th annual *Words & Music Night* for flagship education program with recording artist Chase Bryant as host. Photo credit: Jason Davis, Getty Images. Permission for use granted July 13, 2015.

Abstract

Music is often regarded as a thing of the creative realm, something that sits to the side of the main core subjects, but music in the classroom shows music can be much more than a complement to a poetry unit. The author's journey through the Country Music Hall of Fame's Words & Music program revealed that delving into the world of songwriting can encourage novice writers' confidence and provide a valuable opportunity for students to learn how to build a quality piece of writing from freewriting sessions. This article shares the insights and experiences of an English teacher and her ninth grade classroom when they participated in Words & Music.

Keywords: Words & Music program, writing process, songwriting, writer confidence, freewrites

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While I was at a seminar a few years ago, Katherine Bomer, a professional development and literacy consultant, said, “We should be looking at all kinds of people: poets, musicians, sculptors, dancers, etc., to discover their processes.” Intrigued by her remark and eager to find proof that creative writing has more than just intrinsic value in the classroom, I began to explore the process of songwriting and the ways to learn about writing from musicians. I found that research on songwriting is vast and spans across the fields of psychology, music, and education. A review of the literature revealed that writing songs can be therapeutic (Jones, 2005; Stephenson, 2001), can give students a voice and confidence (Elsila, 1998; Hollander, 2010; Sanchez, 2010; Soderman & Folkestead, 2004; Stephenson, 2001), can evoke critical thinking and understanding (Kirkland, 2008; Rodriguez, 2014; Stephenson, 2001; Ungerleider & Harrison, 1987), and can promote collaboration (Bruffee, 1973; Rodriguez, 2014; Stephenson, 2001), all important components of the writing process.

During my research, I also uncovered several programs across the United States that connected a professional songwriter or music organization to a K-12 classroom. These programs are generally in larger metropolitan areas, such as New York, Memphis, and Nashville, where there is a rich, thriving music culture that had gained notoriety decades ago. One of which is the Words & Music program, part of the outreach department at the Country Music

By participating in a shared writing experience with their own students, educators have the chance to sit in the seat of uncertainty that is navigating the writing process (Reid, 2009). By choosing to engage in one of the professional programs discussed above, I was able to see my own writing process through the eyes of a learner and was reminded how frightening and difficult tackling a new genre can be.

Hall of Fame. This program is designed for elementary teachers to use in core or music education classrooms but has been successfully implemented through high school. Educators receive a copy of the program's curriculum and utilize whatever parts they choose to help their students write lyrics for an original song. The lyrics are then submitted to the outreach coordinator who passes them to a professional songwriter. Finally, the students get to meet with the songwriter (either in person or virtually) and hear their words put to music.

Another program is the Metropolitan Opera Guild's Students Compose Opera based in New York. The Guild does not have a set curriculum for the program (J. Chou, School Programs Advisor, personal communication, September 25, 2012); rather, it uses research-based practices to work with schools and teachers to develop a customized curriculum that fits the age level and course of the participants. Students Compose Opera allows students to construct their own performance piece using a variety of visual arts such as dance, theater, music, and visual arts, and "provides a powerful strategy for integrated instruction" across several core courses (Metropolitan Opera Guild, 2012, p. 5).

The third program, also centered in New York, was run by Natalie Merchant, a successful recording artist and songwriter. Merchant searched for obscure children's poems and turned them into songs that are included on a CD that accompanies her book *Leave Your Sleep*. She then created a guide that connects her songs to the Common Core Standards and worked with teachers in New York classrooms to share her love of music and poetry with students across the city.

By the sheer number of students participating in these programs offered by professionals in the entertainment industry, the notion that songwriting is a successful mode of discourse for learning is clear. Songwriting, whether it be through lyrical composition or composition of opera, has a place in the K-12 curriculum that

goes beyond intrinsic value and meets both state and Common Core Standards (Rodriguez, 2014).

The purpose of this article is to take you through the journey of participating in one of these professional programs and reveal what my students and I learned about our writing processes and our confidence in writing. In this article, examples of our processes from the beginning stage to the final product along with our reflections on participating in such a program will be shared as we ponder the value of including a music-based literacy program in the curriculum.

The Experience and the Lessons Explored

Teachers do not often have the chance to share a writing experience with their students that will be presented to an audience. Typically, the students do the bulk of the writing and the teacher spends his or her time working to critique and improve student writing. In this type of composition classroom, the struggles of the writing process for the teacher come from the volume of comments or critiques needed for each student to improve his or her own writing, not from the teacher struggling through the writing process. However, "teachers who experience writing difficulty do not only connect emotionally to their students, something they might do after reading what their students write, but they gain clarity about how students learn to write better" (Reid, 2009, p. 201). By participating in a shared writing experience with their own students, educators have the chance to sit in the seat of uncertainty that is navigating the writing process (Reid, 2009). By choosing to engage in one of the professional programs discussed above, I was able to see my own writing process through the eyes of a learner and was reminded how frightening and difficult tackling a new genre can be.

After I signed up for the Words & Music program, I wrote two songs as a training exercise. I was hesitant because at this point in my career, I had not shared my creative writing with a large audience, let alone a professional audience, nor had I ever dabbled in the genre of songwriting before. Writing a song had long been something on my wish list, but I never had the musical talent to create a melody. Now I was being presented with opportunity for that to happen and for my students to write something meaningful that would be shared outside our classroom walls. I swallowed my fear and knew I had to go through all aspects of this experience myself before I could talk my students into doing it. And thus, I went home and searched for something worth writing about. I messed around with words, pulled out old notebooks with doodles and failed attempts at writing astounding poetry, mixed that with a little inspiration and penned two songs. I sent my lyrics off to the outreach coordinator, David, who passed them onto a professional songwriter. While waiting to schedule my training meeting, I convinced myself that the professional songwriter would think my lyrics were terrible and would completely change everything I had written. Two weeks later, David introduced me to the songwriter and I got to hear my words put to music for the first time. The outreach coordinator introduced me to Jerry Vandiver, a long-time country songwriter

who is credited with such hits as Gene Watson's *Don't Waste It on the Blues* and Tim McGraw's *For a Little While* (Vandiver, 2013). They both talked me through the process of what would take place in this conference call, which would include some basics on songwriting and a think-aloud style of revision. When I heard Jerry sing my words for the first time, I was in awe. He made my lyrics sound like an authentic country song, and he changed only what was necessary to make the meter in the lyrics work. I was thoroughly impressed and my confidence as a writer was boosted

VANDIVER: (*singing*)

*That night there had been a fight
We said some words to each other
That weren't quite right
She said if things didn't change,
She was gonna hafta leave
Gonna make a life without me*

Then we go to the channel

*But something must have stopped her
Out under those stars
She grabbed me by the hand
And led me to the car
That's when she said to me,
Baby, take the long way home
Park up by the creek
under the willow tree
We'll ride out the night
with some music and kissin'
Just the moon, yeah, you and me
Your love's what I been missin'*

Now, now that fit, I'm trying to...I'm havin' a hard time making that rhyme work. Now, and I want it.

*Let's ride out the night with some music and kissin'
Yeah, baby your love's what I been missin'
So, take the long way home and start reminiscin'*

So see, I cut out that "yeah baby, just you and me" because I wanna make that rhyme work. 'Cause reminiscin', missin', and kissin' is great. That's a really cool little triple rhyme in there. So, your next challenge then would be to change, take that second verse, match the meter up with the third verse, and then add another pre-chorus and we'll go back...

*That's when she said to me
Baby, take the long way home
Park up by the creek
Under the willow tree
We'll ride out the night with some music and kissin'
Baby your love's what I been missin'
So, let's take the long way home and start reminiscin'*

because my writing, in an unfamiliar genre, had been accepted by a professional (see Figure 1).

My next step was to review the lesson guide and figure out how to work songwriting into my English I course before the winter break. Fortunately, David was a teacher before he started writing songs and knew it is sometimes difficult to follow a curriculum step-by-step. He recommended modifying the lessons to fit what I needed to accomplish as long as my students dedicated plenty of time to freewriting and wrote lyrics to submit by the deadline.

Freewriting is taking a small amount of time, strictly dedicating it to writing, and letting the pen transcribe whatever thoughts might come to mind during that period without any regard for conventional correctness, editing, or revising. The value of freewriting comes from disregarding the obsession with mistakes and getting "it" right to move forward through the writing process into a pool of words that can be plucked and picked apart at a later time. Freewriting takes the power away from the assigned task and puts it back into the hands of the writer (Elbow, 1973). To give students a wide variety of possible topics for their songs, I gave students many forms of inspiration right before their freewriting sessions. For example, we watched video clips of famous, powerful movie scenes such as "You can't handle the truth" from *A Few Good Men*. Students were then given 10 minutes to write whatever came to mind, whether it was related to the scene or not. Other times, the students were asked to sit down and freewrite as soon as they entered the classroom, allowing them time to just pour out whatever had happened to them that day.

We completed different freewriting activities over a two-week period and each student amassed quite a few pages of words on a variety of topics. In addition to freewriting, I taught lessons from the provided curriculum about song elements such as prosody, meter, chorus, and bridge. We then started shaping our freewrites into actual songs. I gave my students the choice to work in groups or to work alone or to do both.

This is the point where the class naturally split into two sections. Some of the students were very comfortable moving from freewrite to song lyrics, and I, for the most part, left them alone to write. Others needed more guidance to mold their words. With these particular students, I conferred with them and asked them to reread their freewrites, highlighting phrases that stood out and placing each phrase on its own sticky note so we could physically manipulate the words until they formed a hook. Once we had chosen the hook, we sequenced the sticky notes so they sounded like bits of a story. By doing these exercises, the students were able to establish a sort of framework for their lyrics and just needed to fill in some missing parts. Using questioning strategies, more freewrites, and more phrase selections (see Figure 2), these students were able to complete one or more sets of lyrics.

Before we sent them off to a professional songwriter, the class made the decision to share with each other the lyrics they would submit. We displayed each set of lyrics with a projector, read them aloud in a poetic manner, and asked for feedback. The point of

Figure 1. A snippet of the transcript from the teacher training with David Bogart and Jerry Vandiver (October 19, 2012).

QUICK WRITE
 I hate it when you lie - 10 things I
 HATE about you
 10/25/12
 Which do you want from me?
 I want the truth!
 You can't handle the truth!
 I tell you that I'm fine &
 you tell me to quit lying
 so I continue to deny it
 you still don't buy it
 what is it you really want
 from me? Oh really you
 want the truth? You really
 can't handle the truth.
 The truth is what? Its too much
 for you. You can't stand me
 so why stay near me?
 when I tell you that I love
 you
 don't shut me out
 don't put me down
 I'm special
 special as ever
 so the truth is you can't
 handle
 have me or handle my
 tender loving.

catch me in a lie, someday that
 may be true, but at the moment
 I have nothing to lie about.
 I'm glad my mom's involved
 in my life. I just wish she
 don't have to be so curious with
 it. I love my mom, I don't
 want to hurt her, or defect her
 so I can't bring myself to complain
 about it to her. I could just
 see how disappointed she would
 be. She likes learning about my
 life. I just wish I could like
 it too.

Running fast from this grave
 Slapping every one in the face
 shouting at the top of my lungs
 the sky is burning
 and the earth is shaking
 from night's touch NO
 is it cause of my sins
 Blame me! Just like the other guys in town
 who it's ~~my~~ true
 I scraped that ~~straw~~ bottle of misery
 and I ~~put~~ ~~it~~ ~~down~~
 Don't
 I'm crying
 things happen
 no more deep words my heart swells
 I keep staying
 I can't see and I'm
 I'm tired
 of every fancy
 excuse
 every time

Regrets flow
 through her mind
 As her empty heart
 beats one last time
 Trampled over
 her heart
 Fed it to the
 beast
 Do you really
 mean what you
 say?
 meaning no harm
 I Crave the truth
 long for the truth
 let's be real, you
 can't handle the
 truth

Figure 2. Samples of student freewrites and line selection.

this exercise was not to criticize each other's words, but to make sure the intended message or story was coming across clearly. With a few minor revisions, the lyrics were ready to be sent off (see Figure 3).

The end result of the lyric writing was pretty impressive, especially for my students who claimed to hate writing. Two weeks later, via Facetime, we met with our songwriter who had selected four of the submitted lyrics and put them to music.

The students were paired with Bob (Robert) Spanburgh who had been working with the program for over 15 years at that time

(Spanburgh, 2015). Bob informed the students that he selected the songs based on meter and his musician's intuition. He said that some lyrics just kind of brought a melody with them, and although he would like to perform everyone's songs, time constraints didn't allow him to. The students were a bit antsy because this was the first time they were sharing their writing with a professional writer and nobody knew which lyrics Bob had chosen. We went

Prey No More

by Loren Gonzales and Melanie Flores

Tear me loose again
Before I fall off this ledge
And you may not care at all
But just try to push me off this edge
A feeling of hate has consumed me
Leaving a small black shimmer of how I used to be

Running fast from this grave
Slapping everyone in the face
Shouting at the top of my lungs
I fear the time is almost up

Like my love for you
Your reputation is gone
Now I see the light of day
No longer will I stay prey
To your shredding ways
I'm crashing down now

Then I grabbed the bottle of misery
And swallowed whole
Angels save me
This grave is taking me
And watching me burn to the ground
Staring at my soul under the sun's guilt

Crying because of your inner thoughts
Choking on the love we took
Aiming just isn't enough
Like your looks
My love for you is gone
Even though we both said we'd never give up

Running fast from this grave
Slapping everyone in the face
Shouting at the top of my lungs
I fear the time is almost up

The memories burn at the back of my mind
So tell me how we ended up like this
Loving you makes me want to run and hide

Haunted by my memories
Hate me in my bitter days
Screaming in a hopeless way
I pray

October

by Aurora Gomez

October never seemed to be my month
Full of many wishes, just never any luck
Well, October never seemed to last too long.
Yet, in a blink of an eye, it was easily gone

October, October, why do you do this to me?
You bring along love as if it was something I need

We both know I didn't go looking for this
Didn't know what to expect 'til he gave me a kiss
October, please tell me that you're not wrong
Because of the nineteenth, I'm writing this song

October, October why did you do this to me?
You bring along love as if it's what I need

Confusion, illusion. October, you're full of tricks and treats
Please let him stay, if he's really what I need

Because like the fall breeze, you always let them roam away
But I want him like no other. Please, make him stay
October, October, you brought along this love again
And I just don't want to be left luckless

October, October, Why did you do this to me?
You bring along love as if it's something I need

Well, October, never seemed to be my month
Full of many wishes, just never any luck

The American Dream

by Yoseph Mahmoud

Verse 1

After years of fighting for freedom and for rights
Our flag is still wavin'
Through the shouts and the cries
Neighbor against neighbor
Blaming each other for this strife

Chorus

It's that American Dream
So blurry it may seem
But in my eyes
There's hope in the unforeseen
We can still have, still have that American dream
If we just decide what America means

Verse 2

In the distance so far away
What's present is hard to say
Guns blazin', heat, and sand
Fightin' for this great land
Inside, my heart swells with faith

Verse 3

Standin' here
Pretending to be patriotic
When all we are is idiotic
Deepening the Great Divide
Fightin' over what we can't decide

Verse 4 (Maybe?)

From the shores of the Gulf
To Tornado Alley
From orange fields in Oregon
To corn fields in Missouri
We are all one unity
Standing bold, so proud and free
I will always pledge to thee
My devotion and liberty
Cause there's no reason

Verse 5 (maybe)

From the east or the west
We welcome all with a vision
A vision for success without any rest
A welcoming land for all who accept
A land and it's people far to kempt
We have and will continue to reflect the dream
The dream of the people,
However diminished it may seem

Figure 3. Samples of song lyrics written by students.

through our 30-minute session with Bob, listening as he added a rock-n-roll flair to the students' lyrics. After our session was over, we received an MP3 file of each song Bob played, and we were invited to the annual performance by program participants and the songwriters.

Reflections

What started out as a fun exploratory project turned into something far more meaningful for both my students and me. Research has shown that songwriting gives students a voice and builds their confidence (Eisla, 1995; Hollander, 2010; Sanchez, 2010; Soderman & Folkstead, 2004; Stephenson, 2001), but I didn't know that it would increase my confidence in my own writing and my ability to teach writing. That was the first time my writing was critiqued by a professional outside of the education realm, and the critique turned out to be far more beneficial than judgmental, which dispelled my original fears.

When my students wrote reflections on the program, they revealed how their attitudes towards writing in general had changed. Melanie and Aurora both reflected on how the program made them understand their own writing process better. Melanie

By working with my students through this endeavor, I became more aware of how powerful the process of writing is, how different it can be for each person, and how I can help each student work through his/her process to reach the final product.

realized there were multiple ways to tell a story, and although the story or words may seem simple, the effort to get those words clear and smooth and patterned as a song was quite a process. Aurora discussed how the freewrites helped her better move through the writing process by allowing her to spill her thoughts on paper and then connect the dots. She realized her thoughts could produce "anything you want if you let the writing take you wherever it wants to go." Many students also commented on the development of their self-esteem, stating, "Hearing my lyrics to his tune showed me that words that come from me could be very powerful. The program made me want to be heard" and "[The program] taught me to have more confidence in everything I write."

My perception on creative writing was also changed. Prior to my research and to my participation in this program, I knew creative writing was valuable in the classroom, but I had a hard time proving how creative writing could benefit other forms of writing. Through this experience, I learned that songwriting is not just beneficial to learning poetry because of its connection to rhyme, prosody, and figurative language (Stephenson, 2001), but can also cover literary elements such as plot structure, characters, and setting (Stephenson, 2001). In addition, I saw my students analyze culture contexts in other songs as we worked through the provided curriculum, and some even chose to analyze and write about their own culture. My students also developed general writing skills, as students in the literature did. Their writing had to appeal to a large audience and catch that audience's attention by using phrases that could be easily remembered (Stephenson, 2001), which opened up the dialogue to participate in larger conversations (Kirkland, 2008). They found intertextual connections among the songs they studied as well as among their own freewrites. By working with my students through this endeavor, I became more aware of how powerful the process of writing is, how different it can be for each person, and how I can help each student work through his/her process to reach the final product.

For those interested in the possibility of having a similar experience with a music-based curriculum in their classroom, visit <http://countrymusichalloffame.org/ContentPages/program-offerings> or email David Bogart at dbogart@countrymusichalloffame.org.

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